



2015 Mark Sacks Lecture Williams, History, and 'the Impurity of Philosophy'

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Williams, History, and 'the impurity of philosophy'

All respect then for the good spirits that may rule in these historians of morality! But it is, unhappily, certain that the historical spirit itself is lacking in them, that precisely all the good spirits of history itself have left them in the lurch! As is the hallowed custom with philosophers, the thinking of all of them is by nature unhistorical; there is no doubt about that.

Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, essay I, 2

A major part of the contribution of Bernard Williams to philosophy lies in the wealth and variety of his studies of great figures in the history of philosophy, beginning with his book on Descartes, through to his path-breaking work on Homer and Greek tragedy in Shame and Necessity, his later work on Nietzsche, and the general historical sweep of his last book Truth and Truthfulness. It is primarily in his practice as a philosopher that he demonstrates so powerfully the importance of the history of philosophy for the contemporary practice of philosophy. He was also, of course, deeply reflective about the fact that philosophy is a discipline with a special relation to its history, that it doesn't shed its history but continues to be defined by it even in its current practice. He was concerned, among other things, with the question of what it says about philosophy as a discourse that aspires to be a form of knowledge, and therefore progressive in one way or another, that it is yet in continual confrontation with its history, as a resource for comprehension and critique of the present.

In this paper I will try to say something interconnected about the meaning of the importance of history and historical understanding in Williams' work, and the relation of this emphasis of his to several other themes in his later philosophical writing. Particularly in his later work, Williams was concerned to claim an importance for history in the self-understanding of the practice of philosophy that went well beyond the usefulness of including works of the past in a philosophy curriculum. There are several different facets to this. One such expression occurs in his late essay 'Philosophy as a humanistic discipline' (Williams 2006a). He is speaking of how the contemporary philosopher may understand the transition from the political and ethical ideas that characterize the pre-modern world to those which characterize liberal democracies, and asks in what sense the contemporary philosopher can see these later ideas as having won out over the others. If, for example, for the modern ideas of individual freedom and equality to have 'won' means something more vindicating than merely having displaced the earlier ideas, then the philosopher must face the fact that the very 'forms of the argument, call them liberal forms of argument, are a central part of the outlook we accept' (p. 190) This realization raises a question of what a satisfyingly vindicating account of such a transition could look like, one that did not simply re-assert the dominance of the historically later forms of thought over the ones they displaced. As Williams goes on to say,

There are indeed, or have been, stories that try to vindicate historically one or another modern conception, in terms of the unfolding of reason, or a growth in enlightenment, or a fuller realization of freedom and autonomy which is a constant human objective; and there are others. Such stories are unpopular at the moment, particularly in the wide-screen versions offered by Hegel and Marx. With philosophers in our local tradition the stories are unpopular not so much in the sense that they deny them, as that they do not mention them. They do not mention them, no doubt, in part because they do not believe them, but

also because it is not part of a philosophical undertaking, as locally understood, to attend to any such history. But—and this is the point I want to stress—we must attend to it, if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions. p. 191

We cannot know what attitude to take toward our own conceptions because, in the absence of an understanding of what a genuinely vindicating historical account would be, the philosopher can be reduced simply to saying that ‘the earlier outlook fails by arguments the point of which is that such outlooks should fail by them.’ (191). Here then, a particular form of historical understanding is claimed as requisite for the contentful philosophical self-confidence in contemporary conceptions and forms of argument, something beyond the self-congratulation of the succeeding tradition.

The history of philosophy also contributes to the reflective understanding of contemporary conceptions in providing a kind of Verfremdungseffekt for the conceptual landscape we take for granted, the role of history, as he puts it, in ‘making the familiar looks strange, and conversely’ (181, n. 2). This is part of the critical role of studying philosophy historically, as well as its importance in releasing the constraints on philosophical imagination that come with a certain professionalization of the subject. As he puts it in his essay on Collingwood, ‘the point of reading philosophers of the past is to find in them something different from the present—and that is not just a historical but a philosophical discovery’ (Williams 2006b: 344) However, a more distinctive claim that he makes in the same essay is that ‘philosophy’s engagement with history go a long way beyond its concern with its own history, though that is certainly part of it’. (‘Humanistic’: 181). This thought brings in history

not just in the sense of a succession of ideas or theories within the discourse of philosophy itself, but places philosophy and its self-understanding within the wider domain of history itself, the story of the various forces and institutions that issue in the heterogeneous demands (scientific, political, and literary, among others) that produce the forms of understanding that have been called philosophical over the centuries. This is of a piece with what Williams elsewhere calls ‘the impurity of philosophy’¹, that it is in the nature of its own concerns that it must concern itself with forms of knowledge outside of any a priori self-definition of its proper aims and methods. Finally, largely implicit in these remarks, but still important to this theme in his work, is the model of the discipline of the study of history as a paradigmatic form of humanistic understanding, something which the legacy of positivism in philosophy still renders difficult to discern as a distinctive form of knowledge, finding no natural home for history as a form of knowledge between the more familiar poles of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the a priori disciplines of logic and mathematics on the other. The discipline of history, he suggests, can be a paradigm for the disciplinary self-understanding of philosophy, in the sense of an exemplary object of comparison, which can help correct some of its illusions about itself, particularly with respect to certain ideals of self-sufficiency.²

Let me begin with a tension between a thesis of the autonomy of some region of discourse or some human practice (e.g., morality or human conventions generally), and the acknowledgement of its historical character. Such claims to autonomy may take various forms. In the case of morality, it may take the form of claiming that while moral systems and traditions necessarily evolve within specific historical circumstances, the specifically normative status of moral claims themselves is independent of these forces and their change and development.

Often the thought here is that to deny this would be to fail to understand the difference between normative and descriptive claims, or to fall victim to some version of the genetic fallacy. In the case of human practices and conventions more broadly, the claim to some form of autonomy may take the form of claiming that human practices generally are constituted by the meanings and forms of thought which are internal to the practices themselves, and thus that no perspective fully outside of those conceptions can claim even to describe the practices, let alone to explain them. Claims of this form are sometimes associated with Wittgenstein, and with certain trends in European social thought. In both the case of morality and the case of human practices generally, the claim to a form of autonomy is made by way of resisting the threat of various forms of reductionism or of de-bunking explanation coming from some other discourse, which might be one of the natural sciences, of Nietzschean genealogy, evolutionary psychology, or certain forms of critical social theory.

As the list of examples suggests, reductive or 'unmasking' discourses thrive and multiply on the current philosophical scene, and in many places it seems to go without saying that the very form of philosophical understanding just is to reduce one phenomenon to another one, often simply whatever natural or social science the writer is most familiar with or confident about. And at the same time such reducing projects spawn their own reactions, which are often merely defensive ones, which take the space of available options to consist in claims of a purely self-defining autonomy for the phenomenon threatened with reduction, as though progressively isolating it from reach of the empirical and historical were the price of rescuing it from obliteration altogether. Particularly in his later work, Williams is responding to all these intellectual currents and seeking to chart a path that is at once historical and skeptical in the

tradition of Nietzschean genealogy, but at the same time resolutely resistant to the reductive claims of some new or old science to displace the internal or participants perspective on our practices altogether.

In the collection of his articles Making Sense of Humanity (Williams: 1995) and particularly in the section-heading 'Philosophy, evolution, and the human sciences', he resists the idea that a scientific study of human nature, one that explores the continuity of human nature with that of other animals, can either displace the level of description of cultural forms, or reveal them to be merely epiphenomenal. At the same time, and in the same essays, he rejects a form of resisting such reducing claims, one that he sometimes associates with Wittgenstein, and sometimes with forms of social theory (neo-Hegelians are mentioned) which claim an exaggerated autonomy, or coherence, or self-sufficiency to human practices and institutions, as though to insulate them from the reductive claims of competing discourses.³ For Williams the appeal to historical understanding in philosophy is part of a battle fought on two fronts simultaneously: against the claims of a reductive naturalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, against various theses of the autonomy or self-sufficiency of philosophy and its topics which would allow no room for forms of non-reductive naturalism, most especially the forms of investigation associated with a Nietzschean practice of genealogy.

Something philosophy should help us to understand is the depressingly familiar fact about our intellectual world that a facile rhetoric of unmasking is often the very form in which knowledge of human life within culture and history must present itself if it is going to have the sound of knowledge at all for a contemporary audience, whether the context is a political one

associated with the critique of institutions from the left, or more commonly in the American academic context where the stance of unmasking is assumed habitually, outside of the context of any political project, as simply following from a commitment to naturalistic forms of explanation (typically psychological, though not restricted to that). It is as though for the ordinary forms and practices of human life, the only guise in which genuine knowledge or understanding of them could be recognized as such was that of the reductive displacement of those cultural and historical categories themselves. Against the background of such warring ideologies, it can seem that the idea of any alternative to these various 'unmasking' forms of understanding human phenomena could only be the expression of a pre-scientific complacency about the sufficiency of our most superficial forms of self-understanding and the folkways within which they are embedded.

One general name for various alternative, non-reduced, forms of understanding is 'humanistic', and this is part of what I take Williams to mean when he says that he takes 'history to be a central case of a humanistic study'. ('Humanistic': 180). 'Humanistic' disciplines may be thought of as those which concern themselves with human affairs within a certain range and within certain forms of discourse, and which seek among other things to explore the forms of self-understanding such discourses make possible. This definition has to remain rough, since it is not possible to characterize what these discourses are other than by example and contrast. Thus while human biology is, of course, itself a human phenomenon, the study of biology is not counted as a humanistic discipline, whereas certain forms of studying history, politics or the arts will be so counted. Still remaining at this rough level we can say the following: a humanistic discipline concerns itself with human phenomena, such as human practices,

institutions, and texts which are not only subject to various forms of understanding (as are the phenomena of human biology) but which embody in themselves forms of human understanding. For instance, it is essential and not accidental to what an object such as a text is, or to what a human practice, like hiring labor is that it exists within the context of certain forms of thought (certain languages, certain kinds of human relation) and that certain forms of understanding are internal to them. As objects of study, they are, in this sense, already themselves forms of human understanding before the formation of an academic discipline to study them. It does not follow from this that such an academic discipline can only aim to 'recover' the meaning already inherent in the phenomena themselves, nor that the very phenomena themselves cannot be profitably studied from scientific or naturalistic perspectives outside the conceptual world of the practices or institutions themselves. It does, however, raise questions about how this distance is to be negotiated if the 'external' discipline is to remain in contact with the shape of the phenomenon it seeks to explain, as well as questions about the ambition of any such external discourse either to undermine or replace the internal understanding of the phenomenon in question. For instance, at a very basic level, in seeking to understand something that is a text, the investigator is obliged to see it as something constituted by the institution of the language it was written in, and the specific forms of understanding which are internal to it. The displacement of this framework and set of categories from the project of understanding such an object would take one outside the understanding of texts altogether. To abstract from that level of description and the forms of understanding internal to it, would be to lose contact with it as the particular kind of object of study that it is.

In thinking about the relations of philosophical and historical understanding, R. G. Collingwood ('the most unjustly neglected of twentieth-century British philosophers')⁴ has always been a touchstone for Williams. In The Idea of History (Collingwood: 1946) Collingwood makes a distinction between the scientific understanding of natural phenomena and of human affairs and human institutions (in this passage he is paraphrasing Schelling, but he makes the thought his own).

Nature consists of things distributed in space, whose intelligibility consists merely in the way in which they are distributed, or in the regular and determinate relations between them. History consists of the thoughts and actions of minds, which are not only intelligible but intelligent, intelligible to themselves, not merely to something other than themselves: because they contain in themselves both sides of the knowledge-relation, they are subject as well as object. (Collingwood 1946: 112)

There are two ways of objecting to the letter of what Collingwood says here, but which I think his broader point survives. It may be objected that the sharp distinction he draws between History and Nature neglects the fact that purely natural phenomena have histories as well, and that even the traditional history of states and empires depends on the vicissitudes of the natural world within which wars, empires, and elections take place. For the moment, let's assume there is a rough, workable distinction between such things as the natural history of species, on the one hand, and the history of human affairs and institutions as it has traditionally been represented in history departments, on the other. (The current evolution of historiographic trends like ecological history and so-called 'Big History' complicate Collingwood's distinction in further ways but do not, I think, abolish the difference he had in

mind.) Second, the identification of the history of specifically human affairs with 'the thoughts and actions of minds' might seem an objectionable further restriction in the proper purview of the historian, for it suggests a focus on individual historical actors, and indeed on a specifically psychological form of understanding such actors. There is no doubt that much of what Collingwood says about historical understanding as a form of imaginative 're-enactment' is limited to such an individualist perspective (and Williams has some very useful things to say about how to interpret this side of Collingwood in his essay devoted to him). But here again I don't think we have to understand his basic insight in this restricted way. The central distinction between objects of understanding which are intelligible or explicable to some outside perspective, and phenomena which are themselves already forms of intelligence and which embody a kind of understanding of themselves extends beyond the case of an individual mind or action, and applies just as much to particular institutions, practices, social and artistic movements.⁵

Like texts, the institutions of the family, the state, or of property are also phenomena which contain a conception of themselves as part of their very constitution. In this they are unlike the phenomena of planetary motion or developmental biology, where there is no 'internal understanding' or self-conception to begin with, let alone one that might be thought to play a constituting role for the phenomena themselves. Human actions, practices, and institutions, by contrast, come into the world already embodying an understanding of themselves, for they are themselves forms of intelligibility (of human relations, of power, of forms of ownership). Williams alludes to this fact in passages like the following, where he

rejects what he calls a 'simple reductionist view' of the relation between biology and culture, one which neglects what he calls:

... the way in which culture not only shapes but constitutes the vast mass of human behaviour. When ancient Greek thought first discovered the opposition of 'nature' and 'convention', it also discovered that an essential part of human nature is to live by convention. The study of human nature is, in good part, the study of human conventions, and that is what it is from the strictest ethological point of view. That is how this species is. It is a claim additional to this, but one which I also believe to be true, that human conventions, at least beyond a certain state of elaboration, can be understood only with the help of history, and that the social sciences accordingly have an essential historical base.⁶

Three themes are announced in this passage. One theme refers to the contrast between nature and convention, but goes on to problematize this contrast by claiming that it is part of human nature to live by convention. A second theme is a contrast between a claim that culture (or convention) shapes human behavior and a stronger claim that culture (or convention) constitutes certain forms of human behavior. And finally, there is the claim at the end of the passage that since human conventions can themselves only be understood with the help of history, 'the social sciences accordingly have an essential historical base'.

To understand this last claim about history in a way that is relevant to the sense of history as a discipline of humanistic understanding we need to distinguish the kind of claim Williams makes here and elsewhere from the different observation that the objects and phenomena under investigation by astronomy or geology, for instance, also have histories, indeed histories which tell us a great deal not only about how these things came to be, but

indeed about what they essentially are. For a similar-sounding claim could be made about the understanding of the development of species or indeed the geologic formation of continents. For these too, the understanding of them needs the story of how they came to be and the forces that shaped them. With respect to human practices and conventions, however, historical understanding must not only trace the forces that shaped them, but must do so in a way that makes sense of the forms of thought that are constitutive of the practices and institutions themselves. This is not a constraint on the historical understanding of continental drift or the origins of migratory birds. In studying human practices and conventions, the historical understanding of them must be able to make sense of both the transpersonal level of the concepts and rules that constitute the convention, and the understanding of those concepts had by the participants in the convention. I take this to follow from Williams' claim that human conventions not only shape but constitute certain forms of human behavior themselves. For it is in the nature of conventional practices to be constituted by an understanding of the convention that is internal to the practice itself, and that is shared by the parties to the convention, whether explicitly represented or not. For example, the cultural phenomena of language, trade, and politics are what they are in virtue of forms of thought that define such relations as, e.g., the relation between asking a question and giving an answer, or between the roles of buyer and seller, and an understanding of them that is shared by the practitioners themselves. The understanding of money and its history, for example, must ground itself in the fact that the phenomena of price, wage, and investment are themselves constituted by the concepts which are internal to the practices themselves. Naturally this is not to say that the understanding of economic phenomena themselves, as well as their histories, does not go well

beyond the self-understanding of the participants in a given time and place, but it does mean that in the case of conventional human practices there is a conception of the activity that is internal to it, an irreducible element of the very phenomena to be understood. To abstract away from these understandings altogether would be to abandon the specific topics of money and price in favor of something else. For even seeing the participants' understanding as distorted with respect to their own practice requires the identification of that practice in terms of the concepts and relations internal to it.⁷

This implies that the very meaning of 'historical understanding' is something distinctive in the case of human conventions, different from the case of other natural phenomena whose histories are important to the understanding of their present configurations. With respect to human practices and institutions 'historical understanding' does not simply mean a causal developmental story, but a story that in some way constrained to 'save the phenomena' of the forms of thought internal to the institution as such. The history of trade in a certain region will interact with the history of climate in that same region, but for the historian to have the phenomena of exchange, sale, or debt as objects of investigation obliges him to refer to the self-understandings of the agents interacting in these ways, and the concepts that are part of the institution within which they act and make themselves intelligible to themselves and others. There is nothing parallel to this in the understanding of the history of the climate itself. Naturally these two forms of history will interact and form one larger phenomenon, as when the history of drought in some region is part of the explanation of the breakdown of relations of

trade. But here as well, to understand the breakdown of these relations, as occasioned by conditions of drought, requires reference to the conventionally constituted relations which have broken down, and which tell us what 'breaking down' means in this context.

A consequence of the different sense of 'historical understanding when it concerns human affairs, one which Williams emphasizes, is that historical memory has a role to play in the constitution and continuation of human practices themselves. That is to say, these phenomena do not simply have histories which leave their traces on current practice, as geologic history leaves its traces in the contemporary rock strata, but rather the current practice self-consciously refers back to that history for its contemporary understanding of itself. At the same time, however, Williams also associates this emphasis on practices and their internal understanding with a temptation he wishes to reject, and to which he sees a proper understanding of the role of history as a corrective. In various places he is concerned with an internal tension in the idea of a properly historical understanding of a human institution, which stems from the competing demands to understand the phenomena 'internally', and at the same time to avoid a picture of the institution as self-sufficient; that is, either as perfectly coherent and without internal tensions, or as isolated from the rest of life, including natural forces and other competing institutions.

The reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding. Here history helps philosophical understanding, or is part of it. Philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts a priori from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some

areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry.

‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’: 192

And in his essay on Collingwood, he says:

One has to make, not just a system, but a movement between various stages of systems, intelligible, and one thing that makes this possible is that in its earlier stage the system of thoughts, understandings or practices was in fact not fully coherent, but was under tension. Wittgensteinian accounts of social understanding have, notoriously, tended to favour a static picture of a fully functioning and coherent system. (357)

This last point is a Nietzschean one, given most definitive expression in the Genealogy of Morals in his remarks on the institution of punishment, where he traces the heterogenous tensions, drives and conflicts that have over time resulted in the current practice of punishment in a given time and place, where those tensions are not overcome but remain unresolved in the practice itself, culminating in the famous declaration that ‘all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.’⁸ Nietzsche's point here about punishment and history is not so much a point about ‘definability’, since something may elude definition simply through being either essentially vague or being conceptually basic, and neither of these are what he has in mind. Nor is it even so much about the alterations of a practice over time, since that poses no special problem for the understanding of either natural or conventional phenomena which have a developmental or cultural history. The point for both Nietzsche and Williams more centrally concerns the fact that a single practice is the precipitate of several conflicting forces which have ‘crystalized’ in a

certain complex form that maintains a certain stability in a given time and place, but whose distinct elements may de-couple or disintegrate under the pressure of the competing forces which gave rise to it, and the conflicting rationales within which it is understood. This general point about the historical character of institutions does indeed stand as a corrective to a certain philosophical picture of what it would have to be to 'define' a phenomenon like punishment, as well as the limits of what Williams describes above as 'projects such as deriving our concepts a priori from universal conditions of human life.' The 'genealogical' point also reveals a certain tension with the demand that the historical understanding of human practices see them as phenomena that are constituted by forms of thought internal to them, for these very constituting forms of thought will often themselves be internally conflicted. However, the denial of essentialism with respect to a practice like that of punishment, and the acknowledgement of its contingent, conflicted, historical character does nothing to show that something can count as an act of punishment, for instance, apart from its being part of an institution within which the participants understand themselves to occupy certain roles with certain meanings (e.g., punisher and victim of punishment).

For Williams, the historically-informed philosophical understanding of a practice like that of punishment must avoid the twin temptations of either an essentialism concerning its internal meaning, or a reductionism that assumes it can treat that meaning as epiphenomenal and still have a human practice as its object of investigation. The former temptation offers an unreal picture of human institutions as we know them that is, as isolated from the complex of empirical social forces that sustain them, and which obscures from view the very possibility of

historical change in a practice or an institution. The latter temptation imagines that the participants point of view, and the transpersonal level of concepts governing a given practice, can simply be detached from it, as though these forms of understanding were simply external to the practice in the manner of a description of it, rather than as playing a constituting role. From such an external perspective, it can seem possible to see the self-understanding of a practice as a whole as simply a superstructure of mystification, superimposed on a ground-level reality that has nothing to do with the categories and concepts of the practices themselves, and which a replacement vocabulary will show to be dispensable if not simply unreal. It is here that the rhetoric of unmasking, as part of our contemporary Zeitgeist, reveals itself as a common animating spirit for both the various strategies of reductionism in contemporary analytic philosophy and the old masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Nietzsche himself is a usefully ambiguous figure here for exhibiting these difficulties. His famous aphorism from Beyond Good and Evil, 'There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena' (§ 108) occurs there in isolation, but is clearly presented as a summation of central strands in his thinking about morality, and about interpretation itself. The forthright expression of this aphorism makes its own interpretation seem more straightforward than it really can be. In the context of thinking about the rhetoric of unmasking, there are difficulties with taking this aphorism at face value, which stem from the general grammatical form of the statement of unmasking: a familiar phenomenon or practice is named, and then said to be, in fact, 'not that familiar thing, but really only this other thing'. We are told that there are in fact no phenomena as understood within a certain system of concepts, but only some other kinds of phenomena which are properly speaking outside that

system of concepts altogether. In the present case we are told: there are in fact no moral phenomena, but only moral interpretations of some other kind of phenomena (relations of 'power', perhaps). The thought presented to us is that when looked at clearly, some familiar or taken for granted aspect of our experience is shown to be unreal, or to be really 'only' some other thing (perhaps something equally familiar, but still disillusioning in some way). This gesture places the two terms in a special relation to each other. The familiar aspect, which is to be unmasked, is in some sense shown to be some other thing, hence to be identical with it; but at the same time it cannot simply be identical with it, since the force of the word 'only' tells us that the familiar aspect does not survive, but rather only some diminished substitute for it.

A general difficulty in this rhetoric is in the suggestion that we have a kind of access to the 'real' phenomena themselves that would permit us to say what they are, prior to their having been interpreted morally. In one way this is simply wrong as applied to phenomena such as punishment or forgiveness, where the phenomena themselves just are forms of moral interpretation. (Punishment is not just any way of inflicting pain on someone or restricting someone's freedom). It is an illusion to think we have access to a neutral level of description of these very phenomena, prior to their being part of a practice.⁹ In another way, the bad idea would be a form of crude reductionism, according to which the only 'real' phenomena in human life are on the level of bodily responses like sensations of pleasure and pain, which then get 'interpreted' morally.

A related difficulty stems from the sense of the word 'only', taken from a different direction; that is, the sense that when we say there are 'only moral interpretations of phenomena' we have a clear view of a kind of remainder that is the phenomenon left over after the unmasking operation, once this interpretation has been pulled away. There is in this the suggestion that a moral interpretation of some phenomenon remains somehow external to it, simply laid on top of it, rather than constituting a different phenomenon. Against this suggestion, consider the basic human practices of giving, taking, and receiving things. If it is only within an institutional context, defining certain practices of exchange, that the physical transfer of certain objects from one set of human hands to another can count as the occurrence of an act of giving, stealing, or buying, then it will make no sense to say that the 'real' phenomenon in question is something that 'merely' gets interpreted as a gift, or as theft, or as returning something to its owner. Rather, the action taking place within this context (including, but not reducible to, the understanding of the practice by its practitioners) is what makes these to be acts of giving or stealing or returning. It is what brings into being those phenomena themselves, rather than 'only' something that bears a descriptive or masking relation to the genuinely real phenomena below. Of course, the picture of interpretations as descriptions laid over some independently characterizable and fully real ground-level phenomenon is a very unNietzschean picture of interpretation, and one that he distances himself from elsewhere in speaking of the work of interpretation as creative and constituting. But on that richer understanding of the meaning of the work of interpretation in the context of human practices, there is no room to say things of the form 'there are no X-phenomena, but only X-

interpretations of phenomena'. That would make no more sense than to say that there are no economic phenomena (really), but only economic interpretations of (other) real phenomena.

What I've been calling the 'internal perspective' on a practice or institution is not itself a psychological notion, but refers directly to the practice itself and the norms, relations, and forms of activity that it defines and makes possible. This perspective is not to be identified either with the individual understanding of the practice by one of its practitioners or by the understanding had by all of them taken together. The examples of economic or legal institutions should make this clear. They are human constructs, of course, but they are so in deeper sense than that in which a cathedral or a highway is a human construct. For legal and economic institutions are not only the products of human activity, but are themselves active conventions, forms of intelligibility whose very reality depends on responses of understanding and recognition. The price of a commodity or the validity of a law is in no way independent of the fact that people accept a certain price for the commodity and recognize the validity of the law. As with conventions generally, absent the understanding and acceptance of the convention by the relevant participants, the convention itself ceases to exist. It is easy to misinterpret this fact, however, for it does not follow from this that the meaning of the institution is therefore transparent to or exhausted by the understanding of it had by either a particular participant or by all the participants taken collectively. Rather, the 'internal meaning' of an institution or practice is a description of the norms and concepts governing participation in the practice, as they are embedded in changing historical circumstances, transcending the memory or understanding of any individual or group of participants. The distinction between these two levels of description becomes particularly clear when we consider conventional

practices that are large, complex, and with long histories, such as those of economics and law. These are phenomena which are not simply human artifacts, but are ongoing forms of human activity constituted by forms of self-understanding, in a way that is not true of planets or blood-cells, but which at the same time outdistance the understanding of them had by anyone participant in them. The depth and complexity of the phenomena of economics or law, even at their most abstract and least dependent on empirical circumstances, where the subject to be understood is most 'internal' to the formal structure of the institution, is something that extends well beyond any individual mind or any collection of minds. In a perfectly straightforward sense, with respect to law, politics and the arts themselves we can only hope for a partial understanding of something that is our own human creation, indeed our own form of understanding.

Marx begins his materialist history of the French coup d'etat of 1851 with the famous words, 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'.¹⁰ This classic formulation announces a tension between the fact that human history is a human creation and the fact that this human creation takes place in a context beyond the choosing, and largely beyond the comprehension, of the historical actors themselves. The past that transmits the circumstances within which 'men make their own history' includes both the historical memory within which historical agents understand and misunderstand their own deeds, and the long-forgotten history that nonetheless continues to shape the practices and institutions they inhabit and act within. This past also includes,

crucially, such institutions as those of work, family, and law which precede any given historical events themselves and are the embodiment of the forms of thought within which such events take place and are understood by the historical agents. The forms of thought in an institution like those of work, family, and law are themselves, of course, transpersonal, and are not to be found in the subjectivities of the agents themselves, either individually or collectively.

Marx's formulation captures three dimensions of historical understanding that can seem at odds with each other: 1) that the object of history is a human creation and thus must be understood in terms that make sense of it as a human creation, something whose conflicts and ambitions occur within their own forms of understanding (unlike, e.g., the motion of the planets), 2) that these events are nonetheless only comprehensible within a context, both past and present, that is beyond the ambitions or the understanding of the historical agents themselves, and 3) that this same past, unchosen and misrecognized, is nonetheless not merely what led up to these events and produced them (as with a natural phenomenon), but is something that gains expression in historical memory, and in this way forms part of the self-understanding of the historical agents. In one sense, the historical past is something simply given and external to the self-understanding of the historical agents, and in another sense it is the very form of how they understand what they are up to in their current situation, how they understand themselves and what they are doing. Given these features of the objects of historical knowledge, and the basic fact of temporal difference itself, the historian is bound to understand the events and institutions of the past in terms which could not in principle have been available to the historical agents themselves. This is true in the first instance because those historical agents cannot know the future they did not live to see, and a significant part of

the meaning of the events in which they participated in lies in the altered world that they produced. Because of this, the historian is asking a set of questions about those events that could not in principle have been available to the agents or societies at the time, seeking to understand empirical and conceptual relations that could not have been part of their self-consciousness at the time. When the historian makes use of concepts such as the 'medieval' or 'early modern' world view, we can be sure that, however indispensable such concepts may be for a kind of historical understanding, they were not concepts available to the people and institutions that are the object of such understanding. Hence it can only be an illusion to think that an historical understanding attentive to the 'self-constituting' character of human institutions should or could strive to overcome the difference between the 'outside' perspective of the historian and the 'inside' of the institutions themselves.¹¹

I want to close by suggesting that a form of understanding that negotiates something like this very set of tensions is part of what Williams finds important for philosophy's understanding of itself, and why the study of history presents itself to him as a model for such a form of knowledge. At its best, the practice of historical understanding can instruct philosophy in what it looks like for a discipline of knowledge to be faithful to two imperatives which often seem at odds with each other, and which in philosophy are difficult to combine in a single view. The first is the demand for a non-reductive understanding of the practices and institutions within which human activity and conflict take place, and which respects that fact that human practices are themselves forms of understanding, which have to be understood if the activities and conflicts themselves are to be understood. The second is a demand for a form of understanding that respects the fact that human practices (including practices like that of

philosophy itself) do not exist in a void, are not self-sufficient or transparent to themselves, do not form static, coherent wholes free of internal conflict or contradiction.

One lesson to be drawn from the centrality of historical understanding in Williams' later work is that the proper philosophical resistance to various ideologies of reduction does not lie in a claim to the self-defining autonomy of human forms of self-understanding, and cannot be found in the isolation of these forms from their historical and indeed biological embeddedness. Actual examples of historical understanding of human affairs and human practices show what it looks like in practice to negotiate the tension between 'saving the phenomena', where that means preserving the internal understanding of these practices, and at the same time showing the temporality, the partiality, and the contradictions of that internal understanding itself. The study of history as a distinctive form of understanding has never occupied a central place in analytic philosophy, and its absence from philosophical imagination contributes directly to an impoverished sense of the space of alternatives in understanding human practices and institutions, as though we had to choose between the various forms of reductionism currently on offer or an unreal ideal of self-sufficiency and transparency. Unlike the various forms of reductionism, the point of historical understanding is not the supplanting of the participants point of view by some master discourse which imagines itself outside the same forces it seeks to describe, but rather situating the practice within a world with a past and a future, which the practice is responding to but which necessarily extends beyond its own temporally situated self-understanding.¹²

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¹ 'The fate, as I have described it, of the theoretical issue of objectivity reminds us in one way of the impurity of philosophy; if it is to have anything to say about that question, it will have to address a lot more than philosophy.' ('Saint-Just's Illusion', in Williams 1995: 148)

² After making the claims for history just alluded to, Williams continues the essay with the thought that 'some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy, notably in the work of Wittgenstein, remain undeveloped --- indeed, at the limit, they are rendered unintelligible -- precisely because of an assumption that philosophy is something quite peculiar, which should not be confused with any other kind of study, and which needs no other kind of study in order to understand itself.' ('Humanistic': 181-2).

³ Speaking of something he calls (in quotes) 'the Wittgensteinian cop-out', he complains of an over-reliance on the idea of 'language-games' for understanding human activities generally, and says of the phrase that 'It suggests an autonomy of the human, under a defining idea of linguistic and conceptual consciousness, which tends to put a stop to any interesting questions of the biological kind before they even start'. ('Evolution, ethics, and the representation problem", Williams 1995: 103). But lest this seem a dismissal of Wittgenstein's thought itself, see the quotation from the 'Humanistic' essay in footnote 2.

⁴ Williams 2002: 237

⁵ Elsewhere in The Idea of History, Collingwood recognizes this trans-individual point: '[Winckelmann] conceived a profoundly original idea, the idea that there is a history of art, not to be confused with the biographies of artists: a history of art itself, developing through the work of successive artists, without their conscious awareness of any such development. The artist, for this conception, is merely the unconscious vehicle of a particular stage in the development of art. Similar ideas were applied afterwards by Hegel and other to the history of politics, philosophy, and other achievements of the human mind.'.: 88, n. 1

⁶ 'Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem', in Williams 1995: 103.

⁷ As an example: To understand any period of American history is to understand the role of race in the law, in culture, in politics, in family life and intimate relationships, etc. A history that was purged of such notions or which relegated them to the epiphenomenal would simply fail to describe, let alone explain, the phenomena we want and need to understand; all of which is consistent with the recognition of what is illusory in the very idea of race.

⁸ 'As for the other element in punishment, the fluid element, its 'meaning,' in a very late condition of culture (for example, in modern Europe) the concept 'punishment' possesses in fact not one meaning but a whole synthesis of 'meanings': the previous history of punishment in general; the history of its employment for the most various purposes, finally crystallizes into a kind of unity that is hard to disentangle, hard to analyze and, as must be emphasized especially, totally indefinable. (Today it is impossible to say for certain why people are really punished: all concepts in which an entire process is

semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.): Nietzsche 1966: 80

⁹ In a related context Williams says the following: 'The metaphysicians perhaps assume that there is a neutral item that cognitive science and 'folk psychology' are alike in the business of explaining, and that is behaviour. But to suppose that there could be an adequate sense of 'behaviour' that did not already involve concepts of 'folk psychology' - the idea of an intention, in particular - is to fall back into a basic error of behaviourism.' ('Evolution', in Williams 1995: 85)

¹⁰ 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Marx and Engels: 595

¹¹ In this sense, the hermeneutical regulative ideal of a 'fusing of horizons' (Gadamer 2004) between the historian and the object of study describes something neither possible nor desirable. Collingwood's ideal of historical understanding as a process of imaginative re-enactment of the thought of the historical actors seems to rest on a parallel error.

¹² I am grateful to my hosts in London where I delivered the Mark Sacks Lecture in June 2015, and for the comments from the audience at the time, in particular a conversation with Lucy O'Brien. An earlier version of this paper was written for a conference on Bernard Williams at the University of Chicago in October 2011, and I thank Jonathan Lear for the occasion and Jim Conant for acting as commentator. Later I received particularly helpful responses from Luca Ferrero, Tim Scanlon, Ed Minar, and Fred Neuhauser.